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ABSTRACT

Richard Nixon's 1952 "Checkers" speech was an innovative use of television for political communication. Like television news itself, the campaign fund crisis behind the speech can be thought of in the same terms as other television melodrama, with the speech serving as its climactic episode. The speech adapted well to television because it was engrossing (the audience was able to perceive it as a real event); it engaged in moral labeling ("good guys" and "bad guys"); and it gave the impression of being definitive and authoritative. Among the conclusions that can be drawn from the episode are the following: (1) television demands soap opera, and the speech was an example of early 1950s soap opera at its best; (2) direct televised appeals are superior to alternative forms of political communication, particularly for "apologia"; and (3) "apologia" virtually requires the direct use of television for the speaker to reach his or her intended audience. (JL)

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The "Checkers" Speech and Televised Political Communication

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Introduction

On the evening of September 23, 1952, Richard Nixon delivered a nationally-televised speech to defend himself against charges of impropriety stemming from a campaign fund that had been established for him by a group of California businessmen. The address, usually referred to as the "Checkers" speech, has been credited with preserving Nixon's spot as Dwight Eisenhower's Vice Presidential running-mate, as well as transforming him from a campaign liability into an asset.[1]

Previous examinations of the "Checkers" speech have focused on it as an example of apologia,[2] or have used it to study the effect of value-oriented appeals.[3] This paper examines the "Checkers" speech as an example of televised political discourse. Nixon's speech should be regarded as an innovative use of television for political communication. While Theodore H. White has referred to this address as "the old-fashioned use of time, the straight-up half-hour face-on-the-camera plea," [4] the speech in fact provides useful information about the effect of television on discourse. The paper advances two theses about the "Checkers" speech: (1) it should be viewed as the turning point in a case example of what Nimmo and Combs have referred to as "soap opera politics;"[5] and (2) the speech was persuasive precisely because it possessed qualities appropriate to melodrama.[6] The two sections of the paper support each of these positions: the concluding section suggests some implications of this analysis for the study of televised political discourse.

I. The Nixon Campaign Fund as Melodrama

A central position of this paper is that the "Checkers" speech was responded to as a televised message: there was no physically-present audience. Rather, the

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speech is one of earliest examples of a message written to be telecast. To understand reactions to the speech, criteria useful for evaluating televised messages must be identified.

It is therefore proposed that the "campaign fund crisis" be thought of in the same terms as other televised drama, the "Checkers" speech serving as its climactic episode. There are two reasons for believing this: (1) news reporting follows the same logic as entertainment programming; and (2) the campaign fund crisis (and the "Checkers" speech in particular) permitted engrossment on the part of television viewers.

Nimmo and Combs argue that television news fulfills the same melodramatic requirements as "General Hospital" and "Dallas". Newscasts identify the heroes, villains, and fools of national and international events, as well as supplying the plot line and providing aisle seat views of the settings of these dramas.[7] Additionally, they conclude that specific stories (e.g., the hostages in Iran, Three Mile Island, The Eagleton affair) received coverage by television which clearly fell into a five-part dramatic sequence: introduction, rising action, crisis or turning point, falling action, and denouement or resolution.[8]

Additionally, like soap operas, television news stories are serial in form. Unlike most prime-time programs, which are self-contained segments and can be viewed without regard to order of episodes, programs such as "Days of Our Lives", as well as mini-series like "Roots" are sequential in nature.[9] So, too, are television news stories such as the ones mentioned above. In each case, this contributes to a sense of progression of events and to the development of a "history" for the characters, whether they are Luke and Laura or Ron and Yuri.

The point being made is that viewer perception of reality is in large part a function of television's perception and organization of events. For example, Iran was covered by U.S. television as a matter of securing the release of the

hostages: once this took place, Iran ceased to exist in television news.[10]

Although television news was in a much different position in 1952, coverage of the campaign fund crisis by newspapers fits the pattern described by Nimmo and Combs. [11] The story was first reported on September 17th, 1952: this was followed by accelerating interest in the story by newspapers across the country, as rumors that Nixon would be forced to step down were circulated; within two days after the "Checkers" speech, the fund controversy had ceased to exist.[12]

The place of the "Checkers" speech in this plot line is significant. Prior to the speech, Nixon's ethical conduct and the campaign fund were the issue: afterwards, the speech itself was the issue, becoming a rallying point for Republicans in the 1952 campaign and for Nixon-haters for years afterward. As one critic has commented, the speech was a watershed in the controversy.[13]

Like other televised drama, the campaign fund controversy permitted engrossment. Engrossment refers to the degree to which television viewers can treat a program as reality. Soap operas are capable of substantial engrossment by viewers: cards and letters are sent when characters "marry" or "die"; on the street, "evil" characters have been assaulted by viewers, while "good" characters have received warnings about their mates carrying on behind their backs.[14] Such engrossment is explained as being the consequence of the emphasis that these programs place on dialogue (increasing knowledge about characters and their motives) and the familiarity of viewers with both characters and setting (principal characters can have very long runs and the same basic sets are retained).[15]

In a fairly long-running political saga, these same opportunities exist. For example, in Watergate, viewers came to know the heroes (Sam Ervin, John Dean), the villains (H.R. Haldeman, Richard Nixon), and the fools (Herbert Kalmbach, L. Patrick Gray), the settings also became familiar--the Senate hearing room, the Oval Office,

the Watergate Apartments.

Lasting only a week, the campaign fund controversy did not have these opportunities. As will be discussed in the second section of this paper, engrossment was made possible in large part by the style of the "Checkers" speech, particularly its penchant for revelations about Nixon's personal life.

II. The "Checkers" Speech as Effective Soap Opera

The writer David Halberstam has commented on the effect of television on campaign oratory: Adlai Stevenson and Hubert Humphrey "old fashioned" orators given to long-winded speeches full of bombast, were incapable of adapting to television as a medium. Halberstam singles out Tennessee Governor Frank Clement's 1956 Keynote Address to the Democratic National Convention as the death knell for the fiery, obviously partisan, and seemingly endless political speech.[16]

The position of this paper is that the "Checkers" speech represents an early adaptation of political communication to television as a medium. While thirty minutes seems to be a long time for a speech at a time when the American television audience has become used to sixty-second political commercials; the "Checkers" speech has to be placed in context. 1952 was the first election in which there were <u>any</u> television commercials for political candidates[17] and, as Rosenfield has commented, thirty minutes seems "abrupt in comparison" with the "protracted, even leisurely paced, nineteenth-century oratorical struggles".[18] More importantly, the speech adapted well to television as a medium for three reasons: (1) it was capable of engrossment; (2) it engaged in moral labeling; and, (3) it gave the impression of being definitive and authoritative.

Capability of engrossment, as described earlier, means that the audience must be able to perceive the televised program as a real event. The television audience must feel that the politician is speaking to <u>them</u>, not some physically-present audience (e.g., the Republican National Convention, the Veterans of Foreign Wars): the politician is discussing problems and decisions which will have a great impact

on his or her future. In other words, audience members must feel individually addressed and must feel that they have both opportunity and motive for empathizing with the source of the message.

The "Checkers" speech accomplished this through its tremendous emphasis on Nixon's personal life. Although nominally a defense of the propriety of taking private contributions to cover expenses which exceeded his $75,000 Senatorial allowance, the speech turns into a baring of the hard times faced by Nixon.[19]

> And so now what I am going to do--and incidentally this is unprecedented in the history of American politics--I am going at this time to give to this television and radio audience a complete financial history; everything I've earned; everything I've spent; everything I owe.[20]

This is followed by a discussion of Nixon's boyhood days, his marriage, his service in the war, his outstanding debts, his automobile, and the dog (Checkers) that his daughters received as a "campaign gift".[21]

It is this section which probably makes the speech most capable of engrossment. If the image to be created by the speech is that Nixon was a victim of an unfounded smear and that he was above suspicion of wrongdoing,[22] it was initially necessary that audience members be capable of identifying with the speaker. This the speech accomplished by "personalizing" Nixon.[23]

Second, the speech engaged in moral labeling. Television displays a tendency to identify all of the players by team, as well as to keep score.[24] As mentioned earlier, newscasts and daytime dramas alike are not subtle about labeling good guys and bad guys. Hence, it behooves political speakers to leave little doubt as to the labels they are applying.

Nixon began the speech at least with the risk of being the villain in the episode. The speech manages to reverse the labels, exonerating the speaker and branding his opponents as villains. The speech accomplishes this by: (1) indicating that the fund violated no federal or state law and that Nixon had not obtained any financial gain from the fund; and, (2) describing financial practices

by his Democratic opponents--operation of a similar fund for Governor Stevenson, Senator Sparkman's employment of his wife on his payroll.[25] Additionally, emotionally connotative language is used to describe Nixon and his family as common people, while the Democrats are identified as persons who have grown wealthy in government service. This includes references to Pat Nixon's "Republican cloth coat", Governor Stevenson's inheritance of a fortune, and his quotation from Abraham Lincoln: "God must have loved the common people--he made so many of them".[26]

This moral labeling is important with reference to two aims fulfilled by the speech. First, an objective of the speech was to restore Nixon's image as a champion of morality in government. Any degree of impropriety attached to the campaign fund tarnished this image. As Democratic National Chairman Stephen Mitchell put it, Nixon was "a Holy Joe that's been talking pretty big--now let him put up some facts".[27] Therefore, it was necessary that Nixon come out of the fund incident not just looking no worse than any other politician, but appearing to be morally beyond reproach.

A second purpose fulfilled by moral labeling has to do with a major campaign issue of the Republicans in 1952--That the Truman Administration was corrupt.[28] Again, the speech dealt with a problem created by the campaign fund: that the charge of corruption applied to both parties and could not be a reason for shifting political allegiance from the Democrats to the Republicans. In addition to the use of connotative langauge mentioned above, Nixon attempts to get the campaign back on track in the final section of the speech. This is essentially a repetition of his standard campaign speech, associating Stevenson with the Truman Administration, attaching the Democrats with regard to Korea and Communism in government, and characterizing General Eisenhower as "The man that can lead this Crusade" to provide peace, honesty, and prosperity.[29]

Third and finally, the "Checkers" speech gives the impression of being defini-

tive and authoritative. This is a necessary requirement if the speech is to serve as a turning point: the speech must be seen as "the last word" on the matter, making further discussion (as implied by the title Nimmo and Combs give to the fourth stage of political and other drama) anti-climactic. If the speech is seen as less than definitive, appearing to leave questions unanswered, it is incapable of serving as a turning point.

Although a great many questions can, in fact, be raised at its conclusion, the "Checkers" speech appears to resolve all of the key issues.[30] It does this through the use of two devices. First, the charges dealt with by Nixon are "straw men". These charges were: (1) that the funds "went to Senator Nixon for my personal use", (2) that the money "was secretly given and secretly handled"; and (3) that "the contributors got special favors for the contributions that they made".[31] Nixon then addresses and answers each of these charges. Of course, none of this answers the broader question, why did a group of businessmen see Nixon as "their boy", making them willing to raise $18,000 for his expenses?[32] As Baskerville comments,

> The Senator explained that he was unwilling to represent a man as his attorney for fear he would be biased by the personal relationship in the event of litigation involving the government. But he was apparently untroubled by the possibility of bias in favor of a man who gave him outright a substantial sum of money.[33]

Second, Nixon makes judicious use of allusions to opinions prepared by a law firm and an accounting firm concerning the fund. The law firm is described as "the biggest law firm and incidentally one of the best ones in Los Angeles".[34] We are told that "just about an hour ago we received an independent audit of this entire fund".[35] After quoting one paragraph from the legal opinion, Nixon says the following:

> Now that, my friends, is not Nixon speaking, but that's an independent audit which was requested because I want the American people to know

> all the facts and I'm not afraid of having independent people go in and check the facts, and that is exactly what they did.[36]

No further reference is made to the legal opinion in the speech: however, Nixon does give a long list of personal financial details, as mentioned earlier. These provide no support for Nixon's position on the three charges he has said he will answer, but they do add to the illusion of objective data given by the speech.

III. Conclusions.

The "Checkers" speech has long been regarded as a slick performance, drenched in sentimentality.[37] This paper suggests that some deeper observations can be drawn about this speech and what it says about televised political communication.

First, whether by intent or accident, Nixon's speech represents an adroit adaptation to the medium at a fairly early stage in its development. Those persons who were (and still are) appalled by Nixon's performance and the favorable reception it obtained should remember that television demands soap opera, and Nixon's speech was an example of early 1950's soap opera at its best.

Second, the incident indicates the superiority of direct televised appeals over alternative forms of political communication (e.g., televised excerpts of a speech given to a physically-present audience, television coverage of a press conference), particularly for apologia. If audience engrossment is essential to the success of televised communication, messages which give the appearance of direct, speaker-to-individual audience member contact are a requirement. The other forms increase the sense of separation between source and television viewer, as well as reducing the degree to which the source controls the organization and content of the dramatic event.

Finally, it should be observed that apologia virtually requires the direct use of television for the speaker to reach his or her intended audience (assuming

that they are a group larger than can be physically addressed in one place). With the "Checkers" speech, Richard Nixon created his own turning point in the crisis: only the attention given a televised speech can achieve this. A press conference, for example, would compete with other news reports: the "Checkers" speech had a controlling effect on the character of those reports.

Notes

1. For discussions of the camapign fund and the "Checkers" speech (which Nixon titled "My Side of the Story") see Earl Mazo and Stephen Hess, Nixon: A Political Portrait, N.Y. Harper and Row, 1968. pp. 91-125; Richard Nixon, Six Crises, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1962, pp. 73-129; and Barnet Baskerville, "The Nixon Affair", in Frederick W. Haberman, ed., "The Election of 1952: A Symposium", Quarterly Journal of Speech, 38 (1952), pp. 406-408.

2. Rosenfield compares the speech with one given by Harry Truman as speeches of defense. He concludes that the unique features of the "Checkers" speech are its inferential patterns (which are described as "catechistic" in nature), its foci of attack, and its emphasis on Nixon's personal affairs. L.W. Rosenfield, "A Case Study in Speech Criticism: The Nixon-Truman Analog" , Speech Monographs, 35 (1968), pp. 435-450, especially pp. 443-449. Ware and Linkugel characterize the "Checkers" speech as "absolutive" in nature. This type of apologia differentiates the personal attributes of the speaker from those which have been identified as reprehensible: this type of speech focuses on the particular (specific events) and is concerned with clearing the name of the speaker. B.L. Ware, jr., and Wil A. Linkugel, "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves" On The General Criticism of Apologia", Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (1973), pp. 273-283, especially p. 283.

3. Henry McGuckin, "A Value Analysis of Richard Nixon's 1952 Campaign Fund Speech", Southern States Speech Journal, 33 (1968), pp. 259-269.

4. Theodore H. White, America in Search of Itself, NY. Harper and Row, 1982, p. 168.

5. Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, Mediated Political Realities, NY, Longman, 1983 p. 14-16

6. It should be noted that Variety referred pejoratively to Nixon's speech as "Just Plain Dick", a reference to the then-popular daytime serial, "Just Plain Bill". Discussions of the "Checkers" speech generally report this without comment. See Edward Stasheff. "The Campaign on the Air", in Haberman, p. 414. See also Mazo and Hess, p. 124.

7. Nimmo and Combs, pp. 26-27 and 14-15.

8. Nimmo and Combs, pp. 15, 30-44, and 53-62.

9. Muriel G. Cantor, Prime-Time Television: Content and Control, Beverly Hills, Sage, 1980, pp. 28-29.

10. Nimmo and Combs, p. 37.

11. For a discussion of newspaper coverage of the campaign fund controversy, see Arthur Rowse, Slanted News, Boston, Beacon Hill, 1957.

12. Mazo and Hess, pp. 97, 99, 106-108, 123.

13. Rosenfield, p. 438.

14. Jeff Greenfield, Television: The First Fifty Years, NY, Crescent, 1981, pp. 182.

15. Cantor, "Our Days and Nights on TV", Journal of Communication, 29 (1979), pp. 66-72.

16. David Halberstam, The Powers That Be, NY, Alfred Knopf, 1979, pp. 228-229, 236-237, 324.

17. White., p. 168.

18. Rosenfield, p. 439.

19. This point is also made by Rosenfield, pp. 448-449.

20. Richard M. Nixon, "My Side of the Story", Vital Speeches, October 15, 1952, p. 13.

21. Nixon, pp. 13-14.

22. Baskerville, p. 407.

23. Rosenfield argues that this "sacrificed the mystique of the public man", making Nixon "a living, breathing citizen--perhaps too suggestive of Dagwood Bumstead", Rosenfield, p. 449.

24. Nimmo and Combs, pp. 30-33, discuss this with regard to television coverage of the Vietnam War.

25. Nixon, pp. 12 and 14.

26. Nixon, pp. 13-14.

27. Mazo and Hess, p. 107.

28. Corruption was one of the items in what Senator Karl Mundt had termed"KIC2"--Korea, Communism, and Corruption. Eric F. Goldman, The Crucial Decade-And After:America, 1945-1960, NY, Random House, 1960, p. 224.

29. Nixon, pp. 14-15.

30. As Baskerville puts it, "The speech is a study in appearances as opposed to realities". Baskerville, p. 408 (emphasis his). As Baskerville indicates, the speech provides no supporting evidence to prove that Nixon had not profited personally from the fund; while it proves that the money was not secretly given or handled, it does not dispute that General Eisenhower was not told of the fund's existence; and, as regards fund contributors receiving special favors, this would be difficult to prove or disprove. Baskerville, p. 407.

31. Nixon, pp. 11-12.

32. The fund story became a "scandal" when several reporters met with Dana Smith, the fund administrator. Smith told them that "Dick did just what we wanted him to do. Here we had a fine salesman who didn't have enough money to do the kind of selling job we wanted, so we got together and took care of some of those things". Cited in William Costello, The Facts About Nixon, NY, Viking, 1960, p. 100.

33. Baskerville, p. 408.

34. Nixon, p. 13.

35. Nixon, pp. 12-13. As in the case of the unprecedented revelation of personal finances (footnote 20, above), there is an element of suspense here. One of the stories, perhaps apocryphal, which is associated with the "Checkers" speech is that, immediately following the speech, Nixon received a telephone call from the movie magnate Darryl Zanuck who called it "The most tremendous performance I've ever seen". Mazo and Hess, p. 120.

36. Nixon, p. 13.

37. Mazo and Hess, pp. 123-124. See also Robert C. Gunderson, "Eisenhower on Courage: The General at Cleveland", in Haberman, p. 401.